

RESOURCE · FLEET

DOT INSPECTION READINESS FOR THE TRUCKS AND VANS YOU RUN.

A practical FMCSA-compliance guide from a Denver fleet shop.

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By the team at Don's Garage Automotive and Transmission — family-owned in Denver since 1970, three generations of mechanics, transmission specialty.

Whether you run CDL vehicles or non-CDL commercial vehicles that fall under DOT scrutiny, an inspection failure means a vehicle out of service, a fine, and your CSA score (donsgarageauto.com/resources/glossary/#csa-score) taking a hit. This guide covers what FMCSA inspectors actually look at, what your drivers should check daily, and the most common ways fleets fail inspections — so you can fix the problems before they cost you.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Federal DOT inspection regulations apply to most CDL and many non-CDL commercial vehicles — including light and medium-duty fleet trucks above 10,001 lbs GVWR.
- The 10-system DOT readiness checklist covers brakes, lights, tires, steering, suspension, exhaust, frame, coupling, body, and engine compartment.
- The 9-step driver pre-trip inspection should be completed before every shift on any DOT-regulated vehicle.
- The top-10 reasons fleets fail DOT inspections are mostly preventable with regular maintenance and consistent driver pre-trip habits.
- Don's Garage offers pre-inspection prep on request — a thorough walk-through of any vehicle to identify items that would fail or borderline-fail before the actual inspection.

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- Stay DOT-ready, stay on the road

Don's Garage at 5515 Washington Street in north Denver has been keeping work vehicles on the road since 1970, three generations of mechanics. We see fleet customers walk in stressed about an upcoming DOT inspection or recovering from one that didn't go well. Most of the time the issues are fixable — and most of the time they should have been caught during preventive maintenance. This guide is what we wish every fleet customer had on their wall before their first roadside stop.

Two parts: the DOT readiness checklist (what FMCSA inspectors actually examine), and the pre-trip inspection guide (what your drivers should be checking daily). Plus the top reasons fleets fail, and how Don's helps fleet customers stay compliant year-round.

WHAT DOT INSPECTIONS ACTUALLY ARE.

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) sets the inspection standards every commercial vehicle in the country has to meet. Inspections happen at weigh stations, at roadside stops, after accidents, and during scheduled annual reviews. There are nine levels of inspection — Level I through Level IX — covering everything from a full driver-and-vehicle examination to a vehicle-only inspection, plus special-purpose, jurisdictional, electronic and post-crash levels. Most fleet vehicles will see Level I, II, or III inspections in normal operation.

A vehicle that fails an inspection gets placed out of service immediately. The driver can't continue the trip until the violation is fixed. The carrier gets a CSA (Compliance, Safety, Accountability) score hit that compounds over time, affects insurance rates, and shows up in shipper bid reviews. Repeat violations escalate to fines, audits, and potential operating authority loss.

Fleet operators don't fail DOT inspections because their trucks are unsafe. They fail because of small, fixable issues that drivers and managers don't think to check — a burned-out marker light, a worn brake pad, a loose air line, an expired registration sticker, a missing reflector. The same handful of issues account for most violations year after year.

THE NINE INSPECTION LEVELS.

Knowing which level you're getting helps you understand what's about to be checked. Most fleet vehicles see the first three levels in normal operation.

Level I — North American Standard Inspection.

The most thorough roadside inspection. Driver credentials AND complete vehicle examination. Inspector checks license, medical card, hours of service, drug and alcohol testing records, plus a full vehicle walk-around: brakes, coupling devices, exhaust, fuel, lights, steering, suspension, tires, wheels, frame, cargo securement. Takes 45-60 minutes when nothing's wrong, longer when something is. Most likely to be performed at major weigh stations.

Level II — Walk-Around Driver/Vehicle Inspection.

Same as Level I but the inspector doesn't go under the vehicle. Driver credentials checked, plus everything visible from a walk-around. Common at smaller weigh stations and roadside stops where time is limited.

Level III — Driver/Credential/Administrative Inspection.

No vehicle inspection. Inspector checks license, medical card, hours of service, daily logs, drug and alcohol testing records, vehicle registration, insurance. Often performed at busy weigh stations during high-traffic periods.

Level IV — Special Inspections.

One-time inspections, usually targeted at a specific item — a brake-system review after a trend report, a study of a specific component class. Less common in normal fleet operation.

Level V — Vehicle-Only Inspection.

Performed without the driver present, often during a terminal audit or at the carrier's facility. Same scope as Level I on the vehicle side.

Level VI — North American Standard Inspection for Transuranic Waste and Highway Route Controlled Quantities (HRCQ).

A specialized inspection for those shipments. Most fleets don't deal with this.

Level VII — Jurisdictional Mandated Commercial Vehicle Inspection.

The jurisdictional mandated commercial vehicle inspection.

Level VIII — North American Standard Electronic Inspection.

The North American Standard electronic inspection.

Level IX — Post-Crash Inspection.

The inspection performed after a crash.

DOT READINESS CHECKLIST.

Use this checklist to walk a fleet vehicle before sending it on the road, after major repairs, or in preparation for an annual inspection. Items are grouped by system, in roughly the order an inspector works through a Level I (donsgarageauto.com/resources/glossary/#dot-level-i-inspection).

Driver-side documentation.

- Current commercial driver's license (CDL) for CDL vehicles, valid driver's license for non-CDL commercial
- Valid DOT medical examiner's certificate (medical card)
- Vehicle registration current and matching the cab card
- Proof of insurance (commercial auto liability) current
- IRP cab card and IFTA decals if applicable
- Hours of service records (paper logs OR ELD records) for last 7 days
- Drug and alcohol testing program documentation
- Bills of lading or trip paperwork for current load

Brakes (the #1 cause of out-of-service violations).

- Brake pads and shoes within wear tolerance (no metal-on-metal, no glazing)
- Brake drums and rotors free of cracks, deep grooves, or excessive wear
- Air lines free of cracks, kinks, leaks, and chafing
- Air pressure builds correctly and holds (low-air warning at 55-65 psi, full pressure 90-130 psi)
- Slack adjusters within tolerance (manual or automatic)
- Brake fluid level correct (hydraulic systems)
- Parking brake holds vehicle on a grade
- Trailer brakes function and engage with tractor brakes

Lights and reflectors.

- All headlights, tail lights, brake lights, turn signals, marker lights, identification lights, and clearance lights operational
- Reflectors and reflective tape present and not obscured by dirt or damage
- Hazard warning lights function
- Backup lights function
- License plate light operational

Tires and wheels.

- All tires inflated to correct pressure (cold pressure check)

- No tread separation, sidewall bulges, exposed cord, or visible belt material
- Tread depth at least 4/32" on steer tires, 2/32" on other axles
- All lug nuts present and torqued (visual check for loose or missing)
- Hub caps and oil seals not leaking
- Wheel rims free of cracks, weld repairs, or excessive corrosion

Suspension and steering.

- Steering wheel free play within manufacturer specs (typically less than 10 degrees)
- No leaks or cracks in power steering system
- Springs, shocks, and air bags free of damage
- U-bolts, hangers, and brackets tight and undamaged
- Front axle assembly straight and undamaged

Coupling devices (for tractor-trailer combinations).

- Fifth wheel mounted securely, no cracks in plate or pivot
- Locking jaws engaged and within wear tolerance
- Kingpin secure and within wear tolerance
- Glad hands, air lines, and electrical connections secure
- Safety chains present and properly attached (for towed equipment requiring them)

Frame and body.

- Frame rails free of cracks, breaks, or unauthorized welds
- Cross members secure and undamaged
- Body panels not contributing to instability or hazardous load conditions
- Mud flaps present where required (typically rearmost axles)
- Cargo compartment doors latch securely

Engine and exhaust.

- No fluid leaks (oil, coolant, fuel, hydraulic)
- Exhaust system free of leaks ahead of the cab and free of holes anywhere
- Exhaust does not exit beneath cab, passenger compartment, or sleeper
- Air intake clear and undamaged
- Belts not frayed or excessively worn

Cab and interior.

- Windshield free of cracks longer than 6 inches in driver's view
- Wipers function and contact glass evenly

- All gauges, including air pressure and ABS warnings, function
- Horn audible
- Mirrors present, undamaged, and adjustable
- Seat belts present and functional
- Fire extinguisher present, charged, and accessible
- Warning triangles or flares present (3 reflective triangles minimum)
- Spare fuses present (or modern equivalent)

Cargo securement.

- Load secured per FMCSA cargo securement rules for the load type
- Tie-downs in good condition, no cuts, no excessive wear
- Number and rating of tie-downs appropriate for the load weight
- Edge protection used where tie-downs cross sharp edges
- Load distribution within axle weight limits

DRIVER PRE-TRIP INSPECTION.

Drivers are required by FMCSA to complete a pre-trip inspection before each shift. This is a shorter version of the DOT readiness checklist — items the driver can verify in 10-15 minutes before starting the day. A driver who finds and reports a problem during pre-trip prevents a roadside violation later.

Inside the cab (start here).

Climb in. Check the dashboard before starting the engine — all gauges read normal at rest, no warning lights on. Start the engine. Watch for warning lights to clear (oil pressure, charging, ABS, low-air). Listen for unusual noises. Check the air pressure gauges climb correctly during pump-up — typical air-brake-equipped vehicle goes from 0 to 120 psi in under 2 minutes. Test the low-air warning by pumping the brakes with the engine off until pressure drops below 60 psi — the warning light and buzzer should come on.

Lights and signals.

Walk around the vehicle with the lights on. Headlights (high and low beam). Tail lights. Brake lights (have someone press the brake pedal, or use a brick on the pedal if you're alone). Turn signals (front and rear, both sides). Marker and clearance lights on the cab and trailer. Reflectors clean and visible.

Tires.

Walk each tire. Look for visible damage — sidewall bulges, exposed cord, tread separation, embedded objects. Visual tread depth check (use a tread gauge if available; 4/32" minimum on steers, 2/32" elsewhere). Pressure check on each tire if you have a gauge. Look for loose or missing lug nuts, oil leaks at the hub, damage to wheel rims.

Brakes (visual + functional).

Pop the hood and look for fluid leaks around the brake reservoir. Walk the chassis and look at brake drums or rotors — visible cracks, missing chunks, brake pads worn down to backing plates. Check air lines for cuts, chafing, or kinks. With air pressure built up, set the parking brake and pull gently against it — vehicle should hold. Release the parking brake. Press the service brake firmly and hold — pressure should not drop more than 3 psi in a minute (typical spec).

Coupling and trailer.

If pulling a trailer: check the fifth wheel locking jaws fully engaged on the kingpin (visual confirmation, then a tug test — pull against the trailer with the trailer brakes set, the truck should not pull free). Check air lines and electrical connections secure. Walk the trailer the same way you walked the tractor.

Engine compartment.

Open the hood. Visual check for leaks — oil, coolant, hydraulic. Check oil level and coolant level. Check belts for fraying or cracking. Check air filter housing for damage. Listen to the running engine for unusual noises.

Fluid leaks under the vehicle.

Walk around the vehicle and look at the ground under it for spots that weren't there yesterday. Fresh oil, coolant, or fuel on the ground means something is leaking and needs investigation before the trip starts.

Documentation.

Confirm everything is in the cab: license, medical card, registration, insurance, current bills of lading, hours of service records up to date. If anything is missing or expired, fix it before leaving.

Document the inspection.

Sign the daily vehicle inspection report (DVIR). Note any defects found and whether they affect safe operation. If a defect prevents safe operation, the vehicle stays parked until the defect is fixed. The signed DVIR is the carrier's record that the driver actually performed the inspection — it's required by FMCSA.

TOP REASONS FLEETS FAIL INSPECTIONS.

FMCSA publishes annual data on the most common roadside violations. The pattern is consistent year over year — the same handful of issues account for most violations. Fix these before they cost you.

1. Brake system violations.

Worn brake pads, brake drum cracks, air leaks, slack adjuster issues. Brakes are the #1 cause of out-of-service violations year after year. Fix: regular brake inspections during PM, replace pads before they reach minimum, address air leaks immediately.

2. Tire violations.

Worn tread (below 4/32" on steers or 2/32" on other axles), sidewall damage, mismatched tires on the same axle, improper inflation. Fix: pressure checks during pre-trip, replace tires before they reach minimum tread, address any visible sidewall damage immediately.

3. Light violations.

Burned-out lights, missing reflectors, dirty reflective tape. Fix: walk-around with lights on during pre-trip, keep spare bulbs in the cab, clean reflectors and reflective tape regularly.

4. Hours of service / log violations.

Driver exceeding 11-hour driving limit or 14-hour on-duty limit, missing log entries, ELD malfunctions not properly handled. Fix: ELD training for drivers, supervisor review of logs, written ELD malfunction procedures.

5. Driver qualification violations.

Expired CDL, expired medical card, missing or out-of-date drug and alcohol testing records. Fix: calendar reminders 60 days before any driver credential expires, audit driver qualification files annually.

6. Cargo securement violations.

Insufficient tie-downs, damaged tie-downs, improperly distributed loads. Fix: cargo securement training for drivers, regular tie-down inventory and replacement, load planning that respects axle weight limits.

7. Suspension and steering violations.

Worn ball joints, leaking shocks, broken springs, excessive steering free play. Fix: include suspension and steering in PM intervals (donsgarageauto.com/resources/glossary/#pm-interval), replace components when wear is detected, don't defer suspension repairs.

8. Frame and body violations.

Frame cracks, missing or damaged mud flaps, body panels affecting safety. Fix: visual frame inspection during PM, keep mud flaps replaced, address body damage promptly.

9. Exhaust violations.

Holes in the exhaust system, exhaust exiting under the cab or sleeper, missing components on emissions hardware. Fix: visual exhaust inspection during PM, address leaks immediately, full emissions service per manufacturer schedule.

10. Documentation violations.

Missing registration, expired insurance card, missing IRP/IFTA documentation, missing accident register. Fix: cab document audit monthly, replace expired documents immediately, keep digital backups in case paper copies are lost.

HOW DON'S HELPS FLEET CUSTOMERS STAY DOT-READY.

Most DOT violations are mechanical issues that should have been caught during preventive maintenance — worn brakes, leaking air systems, burned-out lights, suspension wear, exhaust leaks. Don's Garage handles all of those during normal fleet PM service, which means a fleet on a Don's maintenance schedule is also a fleet on a DOT-readiness schedule.

Bring your fleet by — we can walk through each vehicle's current condition against the DOT readiness checklist, identify items that need attention, prioritize by severity, and quote the work upfront. You decide what gets fixed now versus deferred to a later service. We don't manufacture work — we tell you what's wear-zone, what's fix-it-soon, and what's drive-it-as-is.

Pre-annual inspection prep on request. If you have an annual DOT inspection coming up, ask us about a pre-inspection walk-through. We can review the vehicle the way an inspector would and identify items that would fail or borderline-fail so you have time to address them before the actual inspection.

Fleet customers get the same itemized service records used elsewhere — what was done, what parts, what labor, what mileage, recommendations for the next visit. Useful for your own DOT compliance file, useful for resale value when you eventually rotate the vehicle out.

WANT HELP STAYING DOT-READY?

Bring your fleet to Don's at 5515 Washington Street in Denver. We'll walk each vehicle against the DOT readiness checklist, identify what needs attention, and help you put a maintenance plan together that keeps your trucks compliant and on the road. No commitment, no hard sell. The first conversation is figuring out what you've got and what makes sense.

COMMON QUESTIONS

DOT INSPECTION QUESTIONS.

WHAT IS A DOT INSPECTION?



WHAT IS A LEVEL I DOT INSPECTION?



WHAT DOES A DRIVER PRE-TRIP INSPECTION COVER?



WHAT'S THE MOST COMMON DOT INSPECTION VIOLATION?



WHAT HAPPENS IF MY VEHICLE FAILS A DOT INSPECTION?



WHAT'S THE MINIMUM TIRE TREAD DEPTH FOR DOT COMPLIANCE?



HOW DO I PREPARE A FLEET VEHICLE FOR AN ANNUAL DOT INSPECTION?



ARE NON-CDL COMMERCIAL VEHICLES SUBJECT TO DOT INSPECTIONS?



WHAT'S A CSA SCORE?



HOW OFTEN SHOULD DRIVERS DO A PRE-TRIP INSPECTION?



WHERE CAN I GET DOT-READINESS SERVICE IN DENVER?





CAN A SMALL REPAIR SHOP HANDLE DOT COMPLIANCE FOR MY FLEET?

